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ABSTRACT

The most devastating effects of teenage pregnancy are felt among African Americans because of the disproportionate number of adolescent unmarried females in this community who get pregnant and give birth each year. Aspects of this problem are discussed as they relate to the African-American community. Historical antecedents of the problem are traced, including the trend towards reduced services for teen parents. Studies have suggested that parental involvement in the lives of their teenagers is the most critical factor in the prevention of teen pregnancy. Little attention was originally given to the behavior of young males, but a growing body of literature shows that most men who father the children of adolescent mothers are not themselves teenagers. In addition, fathering without marriage is not associated with socially deviant behavior among African-American males, which suggests that fathering without marriage may become a normative behavior. African-American attitudes toward family planning are also a factor in teenage pregnancy. In the 1960s, black activists were openly hostile to family planning and argued that the use of birth control was genocidal. Although this attitude did not represent black views generally, its resonance is still heard when discussing the use of birth control, particularly by unmarried adolescents. Recommendations are made for addressing the teen-pregnancy problem. Footnotes contain 10 references. (SLD)

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THOSE OF BROADER VISION

An African-American Perspective on Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting

National Urban League, Inc.
1990

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INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy is one of those social problems that just won't go away. Despite recent efforts of community agencies and government to reduce the incidence of pregnancy among teens, far too many adolescent girls give birth each year, many of them unmarried and without the father intimately involved in the care of his child.

The U.S. has the highest teen pregnancy rate among Westernized nations, and the problem, with its societal implications, is growing. Contrary to media presentations, teen pregnancy occurs among all racial and ethnic groups, and in all classes of this society. Nevertheless, its most devastating impact is undoubtedly being felt among African Americans because of the disproportionate number of adolescent unmarried females in this community who get pregnant and give birth each year.

Moreover, although low in actual numbers, the incidence of pregnancy and parenting among African-American youth is pervasive enough to threaten the quality of life in many poor communities and may be even the very survival of family life as it has now evolved among Americans of African descent.

The problem of teenage pregnancy and parenting is aggravated by the lack of viable training and job opportunities for adolescents as alternatives to college education and by the paucity of resources now available through the government to enhance child and youth development.

This diminishing public interest in the young reflects a growing conservatism in the U.S., which was culminated during the 1980s by the radical-right policy shifts of the Reagan administration. Fueled by a proliferation of research by neo-conservative scholars such as Charles Murray and George Gilder, the administration directly contested and frequently cut back government outlays for health and social services programs. These reductions remain.

Like the rest of the nation, during the past decade, the African-American community turned increasingly inward, preoccupied with personal satisfaction or survival, and less active in confronting social issues. Even more critical, many African-American youth, like their white counterparts, seem to be cultivating new and perhaps libertarian views towards sexual activity and personal responsibility that do not augur well for the future development of black families. These trends continue.

Today, according to the National Commission to Prevent Infant Mortality, a black infant born in the U.S. is twice as likely to die before his or her first birthday than a white infant. Many of these babies are born to poor teen mothers[1] who are becoming an increasingly high percentage of all new mothers.

Because of these dismal figures, community-based programs have developed over the past few years to help teenagers struggling to control their sexual behavior and its negative consequences. Many of these programs are rooted in the African-American community itself in the true tradition of mutual support.

The National Urban League, particularly through its affiliate system, has been instrumental in developing and supporting community-based programs to serve young parents and to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy. This effort has been one of its top priorities with a major focus on male responsibility.

Generally, though, the notion that some people bear children "too early" is reflective of how a society perceives the appropriate age for marriage and for the development of a family. It also denotes sharp conflict over how societal resources should be allocated to children and families. As Dr. Robert Hill states, "Public concern [about teen parenting] is generated by the belief that young black fathers totally neglect their children who must then be supported by welfare."[2]

AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILIES VIEWED FROM THE PAST

The extent that chattel slavery has had a negative effect on the development of African-American family life remains controversial even today among scholars and lay people alike. Some, black and white, argue that slavery almost totally destroyed kinship bonds among imported Africans and their descendants, tearing the familial traditions of West Africa asunder, and precipitating the evolution of a dysfunctional family structure particularly devastating for participation in the urbanized society of the 20th century.

Yet, the historian Herbert Gutman contends that the slave culture was adaptive, a cross-fertilization of West African, European, and even Native American civilizations, with many African customs and values surviving in spite of the economic and social degradation slavery represented. Also, using information found in plantation records documenting marital and kinship ties among slave populations, he presents cogent arguments to support this contention.

Gutman suggests that many West African customs carried over into child-rearing practices during slavery. For instance, West Africans placed prime value on caring for their young, usually breast feeding infants until two or three years old. Mothers frequently abstained from intercourse until the child was weaned, and child-bearing was spaced as evidenced by fewer children per family. As a result, the bonding of an infant and mother occurred over a longer period of time. In contrast, European families tended to bear children more frequently and, presumably, bonding between mother and child may have been more tenuous.

Considering this cultural backdrop, the physical and emotional brutality associated with the separation of slave mother and child had to be heart-rending. The strong mother derivative of African culture driven at all costs to protect her young became a towering figure, even, as Toni Morrison depicts in her brilliant, prize-winning novel, ***Beloved***, to the point of child murder rather than child slavery.[3]

Any number of scholars speak of the communal life which characterized traditional West African villages. It is believed that this experience carried over into slavery and has had a lasting effect on the development of African-American family life with its commitment to extended family relationships and its expressed close and intimate ties, particularly in rural black communities and the church.

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For example, it is interesting to note that, in the first third of the 20th century, just a few generations from slavery, the African-American family, both mother and father in the home, seemed stable and enduring, despite the harsh deprivation and overt racism present in the American culture. Gutman documents that, in New York City's Central Harlem—the classic symbol of urban black life—six out of seven households had a husband or father present in 1925, up from five out of six 10 years before. We can assume that most child births occurred inside marriage regardless of the circumstances of conception.

Northern migration after World War II is often cited as a probable cause for destabilizing African-American families, severing the deep family and community roots of the rural South. But a look further back in time may be more appropriate.

The migration of southern blacks has a long history, tracing back to the Underground. Railroad through Reconstruction. World War I was a major impetus with the promise of jobs and freedom in the North, and black communities, such as Harlem, thrived.

Then came the Great Depression of the 1930s, devastating the social and economic status of most Americans, but those of African descent most severely, because their hold on the economic ladder was more attenuated. Recovery during World War II was only marginal for most black families and communities despite the increase in jobs because of the war.

During the 1950s, while most Americans settled into peacetime prosperity, blacks began to migrate again from the South, this time not only to escape oppression b... also because of the loss of farm employment due to mechanization. But the North proved to be no promised land. Jobs requiring unskilled labor began to be in short supply.

Amid the deliberations about rising rates of teen pregnancy and probable causes, scant attention has been paid to the impact of northern migration and subsequent urbanization after World War II on black family life. Like immigrants the world over, from rural to urban areas, from one nation to another, African Americans migrated in wave after wave, seeking the better life—good jobs, a future for their children, freedom from oppression. And they settled mostly in cities where over 70 percent of them now reside. And they settled in localities on the brink of the post-industrial society.

What blacks found in northern cities has been the harsh reality of de facto segregation in housing, in education, and in employment, and a public tolerance of exploitation, violence, and crime which subsumes any marginal gains that they could have made. These northern cities have evolved into hostile places where black folk are subservient to institutions which regulate their lives. What they left behind in the South were the remnants of a feudal system with a loosening of communal ties, probably contributing to high rates of teenage pregnancy and parenting in this region even today.

In the communities, North and South, where most blacks now cluster, they do not manage or even influence the schools. The few health or social service programs present are run by government or voluntary agencies mostly directed by whites. In the past three decades, particularly in the North, these private agencies have deserted black neighborhoods, leaving the residents who remain with few or no services at all. And the recreation centers have left, along with movie houses, and even the

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supermarkets.

Through these years, many black parents have increasingly lost control over their children's behavior, becoming helpless in the face of the deterioration spreading around them. Who can doubt that premature sexual activity would prosper in such places?

Too many young women now seek to establish their independence from parents whose values they view as irrelevant or impotent, energized by the dominant culture's championing of reproductive freedom and youth emancipation—both noble causes, but dynamite in the hands of teenagers too young, too inexperienced, and too ignorant to handle them. And too many young men believe that fatherhood and violence are the ritual steps to manhood, viewing their parents as failures. Now children are bearing babies, while parents, communities, and the dominant culture wring their collective hands.

Changes in sexual mores and parental responsibilities are affecting white and more affluent black communities too, but those in the middle class can minimize the negative consequences of teen sexuality because they have resources and access to services, as always. The tragedy was and is that poor blacks do not.

THE STIRRINGS OF A SOCIAL PROBLEM

Until the 1960s, services for pregnant unmarried adolescents were as racially and socially segregated as other parts of American society. A white female pregnant out of wedlock, particularly if middle class, was offered the comfort of maternity shelters, where hidden from community view, she could wait out the arrival of her child, who would usually be put up for adoption. After delivery, the young mother could return to her parental home and resume her normal life with only herself, her parents, and the social worker knowing the ordeal and pain she had experienced.

During the period of confinement, the young mother-to-be had available a broad range of health, educational, and social services to assist in maintaining her development. Because pregnancy out of wedlock was considered a social disaster, young, middle-class women who "made mistakes" were felt to be under psychological stress, not sexually permissive. After all, why did they get pregnant unless they were acting out some emotional trauma? Social work intervention was predicated upon separating the young mother from her self-induced social ostracism; adoption was encouraged.

For most teenage African-American females, the situation was different. Rarely did they seek admission to maternity shelters, and, if they did, rarely were they admitted once they indicated they planned to keep their child. That these pregnant teenagers wanted to keep their babies was not an indication that pregnancy out of wedlock was more acceptable among African Americans, although the white dominant culture thought so and prepetuated myths of black sexual proclivity. Young girls getting pregnant was just one in a myriad of troubles African Americans faced; besides, the community was used to caring for its own offspring or taking in other children, despite the circumstances of their birth. So these pregnant teens remained at home or in the community. Many times, they married. But regardless, motherhood meant a change in status. School was now closed to them because pregnant and married students were legally barred from the classroom in public education systems around the U.S. Moreover, unless their parents, husbands, or fathers of their children could provide financial support, these young mothers, unskilled and uneducated, inevitably found their way to welfare. There, they would most likely remain, perhaps with more children coming, but certainly living on the edge of life, poor and frequently lonely.

Thus it was, two very different responses to a common human occurrence, forged by historical circumstances and by how human sexuality and childbirth were viewed among the races. Thus it

remained until the 1960s, when, in the thrust of the Civil Rights movement and the embryonic push for women's rights, community activists began to organize health, education, and social services for poor, young, pregnant minority women.

The story of these activists has yet to be told fully. They fought against the prejudices of their day and the legal barriers to education and child care, which condemned poor, minority, and young parents to a lifetime of poverty. They established services right in the communities where these young mothers lived, demanding education on a par with the programs in maternity shelters. Later, they would argue successfully for the right of pregnant students to remain in their regular classroom and to continue their education after giving birth with proper child care and other help available. They would also advocate for legalized abortion services.

Their programs were born of local initiative, not government planning. They were born as a response to a clear and compelling human need. They came alive because someone cared. They also symbolized profound societal changes in how sexuality, not only among adolescents but also among women generally, was being viewed.

Newspaper accounts during the 1960s indicate that the public, while confused by these value changes, was nevertheless sympathetic to the plight of unmarried adolescent parenthood, even among minorities. In this atmosphere, services for teen parents flourished. By 1970, over 350 programs for teen parents were operating. Soon after, federal legislation was enacted to provide a modicum of support; barriers to public education highlighted by Title IX amendments to the Civil Rights Act began to fall.

And then, something happened. As the 1970s wore on—with rising youth unemployment among minorities of color, particularly males; with cutbacks in social spending at all levels of government; with articulated views that poor and minority people had gotten too fat at the public trough—resentment in the dominant culture began to fester and then bubble over against poor, African-American women having babies, perpetuating old tales about the fecundity of black women and the shiftless irresponsibility of their men.

But teenage pregnancy is much more complicated. How teenagers, both black and white, assume adulthood in this society needs to be confronted. Teenage pregnancy has yet to be defined as the result of titanic social changes requiring broad public solutions. There have been relatively small shifts in conceptualizing adolescent pregnancy since it was first deemed "a social problem" in the 1960s. Moreover, services for teen parents or to prevent teen pregnancy continue to be minimally available.

TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND PARENTING TODAY

Despite the heightened public interest in teen pregnancy, a review of historical data will show that, though the number of births among adolescent women has increased in the past few decades—reflecting their sizable age group, birth rates among this group have not risen as sharply. What has changed, however, is society's views about teen child-bearing, married or unmarried.

Early family formation is now considered to be dysfunctional in a world increasingly technology-based and urbanized and requiring a skilled and committed paid work force, male and female. Today, poor and young people are expected to complete schooling and become wage earners before they become parents.

This is a far cry from the past, when the primary role of women was parenting, and the sooner the better! Although African-American women often worked outside the home as an economic necessity, their mothering responsibility was central to their lives and to their families. Their men worked the farms or as unskilled labor in factories, jobs they assumed while in their teens or younger.

These functions have become vestiges in today's society where women of the dominant culture question traditional roles, and men and women need education and training if they are to command decent-paying jobs. Consequently, most young African Americans today are increasingly caught in a cultural bind not of their own making and with few institutional supports to aid them in the transition to this "new society" where they only marginally belong, or so they believe.[4]

In 1985, according to the Children's Defense Fund's analysis of federal government health data, of nine million teenage girls living in the U.S., almost 900,000 became pregnant; about half of them—477,000—gave birth; and of that number, 58.7 percent were unmarried at the time. For nearly 50 percent of these pregnant teenagers, abortion was the alternative.

Almost two-thirds of these births, 62.7 percent, occurred among young women, ages 18 to 19, and about half of them were married when they gave birth. About 2.1 percent of births occurred among teenage girls younger than fifteen. Of the total number of teen girls who gave birth in 1985, about 110,000 had already given birth once.

Although blacks constitute almost 15 percent of teen girls, they make up 29.3 percent of the

births to teens under 20, 35.2 percent births to teens under 18, and 57.3 percent to teens under 15. Even more critical, they also are the majority, 57.5 percent, among teens 14 and under who have repeat births.

White teenagers actually gave birth more often, (322,826 births in 1985 compared to 140,138 among blacks). Moreover, between 1970 to 1985, the percentage of white teens giving birth out of wedlock declined at a slower rate, 25 percent or 57.4 to 42.8 percent per 1,000 births, compared to black teens whose birth rates actually fell from 140.7 to 79.4 percent per 1,000 births or 31 percent during this period.

Not surprisingly, most teen births occur in urban and suburban areas, for the U.S. is a highly urbanized society. Nationally, 90 percent of black teens giving birth are unmarried. Moreover, the younger the mother, the less likely she is to be married.

Unmarried frequently means a lack of stable support coupled with emotional distress. Teen parenting is believed to be a leading cause of poverty among African Americans. CDF notes, for instance, that in 1986, the poverty rate among children younger than three in households headed by 15- to 21-year-olds was 81.6 percent for blacks, and around 60 percent for whites and Hispanics.

Teenage pregnancy affects more than the pregnant teenager if she decides to go to term. Her plight spreads to encompass others as well: the grandparents, maternal and parental, who are sometimes left with the infant; and the baby's father, whether he provides support or not. Some teen mothers marry, albeit a declining proportion; others leave home to live with the baby's father or friends (male or female). And some live by themselves, even becoming part of the homeless population. Also, as mentioned previously, many African-American teens, like others who find themselves pregnant, opt for abortion. Very few choose formal adoption of the baby as an alternative.

Few studies have documented the long-term effect of teen parenting. The most widely influential of those have dwelt on welfare dependency. However, one report on a group of Baltimore, MD, teens who became mothers (some as young as 13) in the mid-'60s and who received services from a special program indicates that, with direct intervention, teen parenting does not have to be a dead end. Very few of the mothers tracked had become part of the so-called underclass 17 years later. Most completed high school and supported their families by working rather than receiving welfare. Few had large families. And one-fourth of the group "became a part of the middle class, with family incomes of more than $25,000, mostly because of the presence of a husband in the home."[5]

Some of the concern about teenage pregnancy reflects a general uneasiness among adults about the liberated behavior of youth—liberated without a sense of responsibility, some adults believe. Despite this perception, the fact remains that most young women are not getting pregnant and even fewer are giving birth. The issue is which teenagers are really at risk; techniques must be developed to identify and help those adolescents prone to premature sexual activity and who may subsequently become pregnant and parents.

Based upon several studies on teen parenting, certain at-risk groups among adolescents can be pinpointed. For example, girls who have school problems—poor achievement, poor discipline,

truancy—and whose families receive public assistance tend to be at highest-risk of pregnancy. This seems to hold true for males as well.[6]

However, as an April, 1989 article in *Harper's* reminds us, poor adolescent girls are not the only ones vulnerable to pregnancy. Describing the situations of young mothers in a community program located in the Bronx, Elizabeth Marek finds that they came from working and middle-class families. Their pregnancies tended to be the result of sexual naivete, failed love affairs, or emotional difficulties with parents.[7]

Most intriguing, the extensive research study reported by RAND found that girls willing to entertain the idea of pregnancy were two to three times more likely to bear a child. Moreover, black females were at the highest risk of single child-bearing, but a "conscious rejection of this works better for blacks than for other groups." For instance, young black women who aspired for a college education had "dramatically" lower nonmarital birth rates than their peers with no college aspirations. And again, low family socioeconomic status was determined to increase young parenting risks for blacks, though, interestingly, less so for Hispanics, and not so for whites.[8]

Conversely, close parental supervision seemed to have an inhibiting effect on pregnancy among black teenagers in the study; for Hispanics, it was religion; and for whites, a high-quality relationship with their parents. Black and Hispanic girls were also found to be at high risk if they came from single-parent families.

What behavior should be encouraged then to prevent teen pregnancy? Most critically, parental involvement in the lives of their teenagers. In the Baltimore study mentioned earlier, the mothers reported that 78 percent of their children, who are now adolescents, were sexually active. Yet, only one percent of the boys had fathered a child, and nine percent of the girls had become pregnant, many choosing to abort. Seventy-two percent of the parents reported that their teenagers used contraceptives, and 93 percent stated they discussed birth control with their children.

Clearly, teens who can turn to their parents for psychological support and guidance may avoid the pregnancy trap. Most important too is adolescent awareness of what is really at risk by becoming pregnant and bearing a child. Adolescence is a time of turbulence, the space between childhood and maturity, when life decisions made frivolously can have lifetime consequences.

Becoming a parent, either when a teen or an adult, means restricting activities in behalf of the child's interests. Teenagers unwilling to do so may become a source of escalating tension in their parents' home. Adolescent parenting can place whole families economically, socially, and emotionally at risk.

It appears that families who can heighten and broaden their teens' awareness about future opportunities lower the risk of teen pregnancy. Moreover, those families in which parents have gotten at least halfway through high school provide motivation and role models compared to those where parents dropped out of school.[9]

What many families need and seek is support. Some can find this through their churches or neighbors. Others are isolated in this highly mobile society from relatives and friends who could lend a helping hand.

For teens who may be emotionally isolated from their families, special attention from a caring staff in a community-based program can have an immediate payoff—returing to school, using contraceptives, and developing parenting skills. Most of all, studies documenting the efforts of such programs validate that building the self-esteem of teens, whether pregnant or parents, is central to making a positive difference in their lives.

Despite these exemplary efforts, the problems confronting teenagers today seem to set young people apart from earlier generations. The Ford Foundation, in its recent study on social welfare issues, states that, "compared to 20 years ago, pregnant teens and parents are more troubled, are experiencing multiple problems, are without family supports, and are often caught up in drugs."[10]

Even more illuminating, the mothers in the Baltimore study described their teenagers' lives as problematic. Many of their offspring were failing in school or having discipline problems. They reported their children as runaways or using drugs and alcohol. And boys were viewed as more troubled than girls.[11]

YOUNG MALES: A SPECIAL DILEMMA

Despite all the discussion about adolescent pregnancy, very little attention was given to the sexual behavior of males and their role and responsibility for the burgeoning teen pregnancy problem until recently. Part of this neglect was undoubtedly due to a general and legitimate public concern for the young female's more immediate problem; that is, preventing pregnancy, traditionally viewed as the female's responsibility, or assuring proper care for the beginning family.

However, there is a growing body of literature on males who father children born to adolescent girls; much of this information regrettably is anecdotal, based on individual contact rather than large-scale research which could undergrid improved social policies that would reduce teen pregnancy. Because of the limitations in existing data, generalizations about the male part of the teenage pregnancy equation should be greeted of necessity with some skepticism.

Nevertheless, let us look at what is generally known. Contrary to conventional wisdom, men who father children born to adolescent mothers tend not to be teenagers themselves. According to national health statistics, 35 percent of the fathers recorded for 62 percent of teen mothers reporting were in their early twenties. This should not be surprising since the majority of adolescent mothers are in their late teens when they first give birth. Most women tend to mate with males older than themselves.

The reaction of males to fatherhood is quite varied, again not surprising given the complexities of human behavior. Some avoid parental responsibility; others become quite involved, visiting regularly and providing financial support.

What else can we surmise about males who father children born to adolescent mothers when compared racially? According to a project assessing what has been found about young unwed fathers, black fathers tend to be like their peers, unlike white fathers who tend to have histories of socially deviant behavior (drug use, crime, etc.), suggesting that fathering without marriage may become normative behavior among African-American males.[12]

Moreover, an analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Labor Force Behavior 1979 to 1986 by Lerman revealed that, of 6400 youth, ages 14 to 24, 27 percent of black males reported that

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they had been unwed fathers at least once compared to 10 percent of Hispanic males and three percent of whites. In addition, almost twice the percentage of whites and Hispanics had married by 1984 compared to blacks. Black fathers more than whites, on the other hand, were more likely to be living with a parent. Regardless of race, young men with incomes above the three-person poverty line tended to be married over three times more then men with less earnings.[13]

Without a doubt, economics play a major role in making a decision about marriage in these modern times, but not totally. True, young minority males and females without job skills are less competitive in the labor market as evidenced by the high unemployment rates among this population since the 1970s.[14]

But among African Americans, "hard times" is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the change in expectations for personal responsibility, not only in black culture, but also in U.S. society as a whole. Moreover, the destigmatization of premarital sex and bearing children without marriage may have as equally devastating an effect as the lack of a good job on whether to marry, even to be responsible for the consequences of sexual activity.

Because of countervailing values about male responsibility, many teen mothers fail to establish legal paternity for their children. Their families may also insist upon no contact with the babies' fathers. In any event, CDF reports that, in 1985, fewer than 18 percent of unwed mothers 18 and under had court-ordered child support payments.

The niche of African-American males in this society poses a special dilemma when discussing paternal responsibility. As males, they have historically been viewed as a threat to white male dominance and thus have been denied opportunities to be "men," to be viable heads of household. This maleness viewed as natural assertiveness and, belived by many to be innate, seems to be turned inward now.

Self-destructive behavior, as evidenced by high rates of substance abuse and suicide, and pervasive acts of homicide and crime among young black men are disproportionate to other racial and ethnic groups. Accordingly, Julia Hale, a noted urban sociologist, and many others surmise that, "The destruction of the black male is the biggest problem facing the black family today."[15]

Because of the pervasive forces aligned against black male development, the early childhood years reinforced by strong parental guidance is crucial. Yet, schools, for the most part, have been unable to meet that challenge. To some researchers, the educational system is very much the problem. Quoting Dr. Willian Lyle, an African-American psychologist, "Urban schools are particularly cold and unforgiving (hostile) to black males. Their behavior is viewed as a nuisance and they are labeled hyperactive, slow learner."[16] Increasingly, black scholars are documenting how young Americans of African descent are sent to special education and tracked for school dropout.[17]

Tragically, the distorted upbringing of black males can bear "bitter fruit." The news media project an image of physical rather than intellectual prowess, promoting violence rather than peaceful behavior. Absent fathers in the home, some black mothers seeking to transcend their own youthful experiences or wanting to guard their young males against the outside world may

inadvertently be over-protective or place them in the role of "man in the house" without teaching or demanding that they perform as such.

Whatever the rationale, the street smarts so evident among young black males, especially from poor families, reinforce a culture of male bravado, strengthened among peers, that is, in all practicality, dysfunctional in today's world. Moreover, this male bonding is becoming more destructive of intimate male and female relationships which are the basis of family life.

The development of black males is an ever-unfolding issue for African Americans and the broader U.S. society. Robbed of their birthright to become self-sufficient adults and parents, particularly if poor, their anger and frustration are turning against themselves, their families, and their communities. It is an issue raised with alarm at two recent conferences sponsored by the National Urban League.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS FAMILY PLANNING

In the 1960s, black activists were openly hostile to family planning, arguing that the use of birth control was genocidal and, indeed, they believed that the promotion of family planning methods was a conspiratorial move by the dominant culture to limit the population growth of African Americans, then as now a higher rate than that of whites. Although the cries of these activists did not represent black views generally, their resonance is still heard when discussing the use of birth control particularly by unmarried adolescents.

Regardless of ideology, information about the availability of contraception, even sex education in some localities, remains sparse in the U.S. As a consequence, for many teenagers, pregnancy occurs because of the lack of knowledge about birth control, or because of magical thinking about sex and its relation to pregnancy, or due to shyness about seeking contraceptive help. Moreover, some adolescents may be embarrassed or uncertain about engaging in sexual activities and therefore take no responsibility in exercising control over their reproductive processes. The issue though is not only to know about preventing pregnancy, but also to use methods that will achieve that end. For that to happen, young people have to believe they can exercise control over their lives.

The idea that sex education in the schools could curb teenage sexuality and pregnancy gained some currency during the past two decades, along with the expansion of family planning services. Yet, at the local school board level resistance exists today to teaching about sex, both about the age or grade level such instruction should begin and the content of the material.

Much of the opposition came from religious and conservative groups who fear loss of parental control over the child's value formation or who believe that family planning, if taught, will be contrary to religious proscriptions against controlling reproduction. Although most school districts in the U.S. now provide sex education, the quality of instruction and curriculum varies greatly. In areas like New Orleans, sex education in schools has been voted down continuously, so no instruction is available at all.

Black parents, many of whom are deeply religious, carry similar views about sex education and family planning, often shying away from telling their young, male and female, about sexual responsibility until it is too late.

Despite the observed inadequacies of sex education, teenagers seem to be using birth control increasingly. However, teens 15 and under are relatively less able to prevent pregnancy if sexually active, probably for the reasons stated above. And the increasing use of abortion as a birth control method among older teens seems to be clear evidence that better sex education and increased access to contraception are called for.[18]

How to engage teenagers in pregnancy prevention is a program and policy issue of concern to all involved in maternal and child health, and in providing services which strengthen the capacity of African-American families to survive and prosper. It is within this context that many African Americans believe the abortion debate should take place.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

It should be evident by now that, for African Americans, unlike other groups in this society, poverty and its destructive impact on family life may be a leading factor in persistent high rates of teen pregnancy and parenting. Poverty is also the single major contributor to infant mortality, despite the fact that teen pregnancy and poor maternal health are statistically associated with premature birth.

Can anyone doubt that poor housing, frequent moving, and overcrowding affect child-bearing and rearing? Studies show that such conditions harm laboratory animals. Why then not humans? The lack of help while pregnant—assistance in shopping and household tasks—and unavailable emergency child care have equally devastating effect.

Moreover, the use of crack and cocaine and the AIDS epidemic among black women and children because of direct association with intravenous drug users are now spreading, compounding the burden of teenage parenting and deepening family poverty. These apocalyptic forces may be achieving what 400 years of slavery and oppression failed to do: namely, the destruction of the African-American family.

In contemplating the impact of poverty, drugs, and other social afflictions, their erosive effect on the human spirit needs to be of major concern. Without a doubt, many young unmarried people, caught in the throes of teen parenting aggravated by poverty or worse, feel separated from family, friends, and community. Their capacity for intimacy, to trust someone, is thwarted. They anticipate that relationships won't last. But, after all, to trust depends upon sound early childhood experiences and positive relationships with parents, something many young parents today have never had.

In a thought-provoking presentation, Dr. Alvin Pouissant, the noted Harvard psychiatrist, argued that "the concept of family may be too narrow for our purposes. We need to think children first." He goes on to say that we need to "create alternative institutions for helping to raise our children."[19]

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Building self-esteem then should be a key theme in providing services for adolescents and most particularly for those from economically and emotionally impoverished circumstances. Other services are also basic: information and access to contraception, concrete help to pursue education and career goals, options for experiencing success in school and in the workplace, and the steadfast support of caring adults. Each can be instrumental in preventing a first pregnancy. Together, they have been proven to be effective within the context of a well-planned, coordinated community service program.

For young parents, these services and more are needed, including maternal and child health services, child care, access to financial support, and, most assuredly, parent training in sound child development practices. They also need employment and training.

Education is fundamental to dealing with teen pregnancy and parenting. Staying in school can be a measure of motivation, as the study reported by RAND indicates. Family life education, including well-defined instruction on sexuality and the meaning of parenting, should be an integral part of schooling like reading, writing, and counting. The schools where youngsters spend most of their day then must be a focal point of any policy strategies.

Underlying these must be a frontal, concerted attack on poverty and an articulation of values which promote individual growth and responsibility within the framework of community survival. As African Americans, we need again to cultivate communal child-rearing.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS NEEDED

Government at each level bears some responsibility for ameliorating the social and economic distress caused by teen pregnancy and parenting. Certainly, the immediate need for health care, education, jobs, and training can best be handled by government intervention. The underlying poverty many young African Americans face each day also required governmental solution.

The recommendations for governmental action which follow address not only the specific needs of teen parents, they also call for policies which open opportunities for African-American youth generally. In the long run, this is the most viable way to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy and its consequences.

In Health Care:

Universal access to full time maternal health care services, including family planning and abortion, if desired. Ability to pay should be deemed secondary and based on policies which would entitle the working poor to fully subsidized services. Aggressive outreach and treatment retention techniques should be developed as a top priority for young, drug-addicted pregnant women.

Universal access and entitlement of all children to pediatric services until age five.[30] The full implementation of the federally-mandated early intervention systems by each state for children developmentally at-risk and their families. The care and treatment of children with AIDS or drug addiction should be given top priority with emphasis on home or community-based services.

Universal home visiting by trained community workers on a regular basis once a pregnancy is determined through the first three years of a child's life.

The provision of adolescent health services, preferably integrated within the school system, to assure appropriate pregnancy prevention, substance abuse education and treatment, routine screening and diagnosis, and other medical attention.

Federal reimbursement for nutrition and health education, and expanded community coordinated health services linked to a viable social services system.

In Child Care:

Quality, affordable child care at hours and locations favorable to parental needs and interests. These services should be available for infants, toddlers, school-age children—as well as preschoolers. Community-based services owned and managed by local residents should be the preferred form of delivery.

Current federal legislation to expand child care should be supported with appropriate standard-setting to assure sound child and youth development. Child-care tax credits, while notable as an income-support measure, should not be confused with the need to expand quality child care.

Child care viewed as a continuum of services for the young child and linked to primary education services which build upon preschool learning experiences. A significant increase in Head Start to cover all eligible children is called for. So is a monitored pattern of cooperation between public and private, including proprietary, agencies, which are involved in child care and preschool education.

In Social Services:

Again, community-based services, small and intimate in style, but linked into an effective, one-point entry network, are of top priority. These services should be integrated across service boundaries

to assure the comprehensive intervention needed in many deteriorating black communities. The basic goal of such services should be prevention, not remediation. Of particular concern is the development of minority-specific children and family services agencies. Currently, few African-American child welfare agenices exist in the U.S.

After-school services, available as well during summer vacation and holidays, should be established to fill the highly recognized gap that exists in African-American communities for youth development activities. Such programs could offer tutoring, recreation, creative arts, and other activities provided by churches and other community institutions, and would assure opportunities for adults, particularly males, to become involved.

In Welfare Reform:

A truly federalized welfare reform system with unified standards is called for. Funds should also be allocated for child care to avoid competition with working poor families over limited public subsidies available through Title XX. In 1988, the U.S. passed major welfare reform legislation, the first in many years. While calling for employment, training, and education to be available routinely to welfare recipients, no specific provisions are made for child care. That is left to the states. Moreover, no national standards for welfare benefits have been set, again leaving to states the option for determining need and level of payment.

This legislation also seeks to deal with the relationship between teen parenting and welfare dependency by restricting teen mothers' eligibility to Aid to Families with Dependent Children. These provisions should be strictly monitored state by state because of their probable impact on family development.

Other income-support measures are needed as well, including increased Earned Income Tax Credits and state liberalization of nonfederally reimbursed public assistance as a strategy for involving single male adults in structured employment and training programs. Also, improvements in child support programs are needed, beyond current federal mandates, which would increase paternity establishment and better consider the father's short- and long-term economic prospects.

In Employment and Training:

Full employment and a decent minimum wage require congressional action NOW. Any veto by the president should not be sustained.

Young fathers should be given priority for employment and training programs as a strategy for promoting their parenting responsibilities.[21]

In Education:

Programs designed to reduce school dropout should be instituted in the early grades. Students who are presenting disciplinary and learning problems can be identified, and they, along with their parents, should receive immediate help.

The African-American community should become more directly involved in school management by promoting local school involvement, pressing for increases in minority staff, and supporting proposals which would permit noneducationally credentialed people to teach.

Universal preschool education should be promoted but within the context of a total system of child care and development.

Special education in school districts around the country needs major overhauling. Minority children with disabilities do not get the services they need. African Americans, particularly males, are routinely dumped into these programs and labeled learning disabled or emotionally disturbed, thus tracking them for school dropout and failure.

The provision of a family life curriculum, including education about parenthood, developed in concert with parents, should be instituted in the primary grades.

For the long term, the feasibility of educational allowances for youth to serve as incentives for staying in school should be explored. Other Western nations provide youth allowances and extended higher education benefits as well.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

These proposals for government action are indeed broad. But remember, family life among African Americans is in crisis. As an immediate strategy, African Americans need to develop sizable niches in human services, including child care and education. Both of these are growth industries and have a direct bearing on how black children grow and develop. Through agencies such as the National Urban League, technical assistance and training to sustain minority service providers are available.

Maintaining support for affirmative action policies by advocating for congressional action to limit the reach of recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions should be pursued. African-American youth need strong role models, adults who are achieving. And the community needs a middle class. Despite the dire accounts of poverty, African Americans have benefited from affirmative action and other government policies since the 1960s. We cannot turn our backs on these now.

Fundamentally though, African Americans need to initiate a value clarification process, involving parents, religious and civic leaders, and scholars. Such a process would establish a mindset around the need for helping black children and aid parents who need all the support they can get. Black youth should participate. A continuing exchange about values and responsibility between all members of the community can only have positive payoffs. But the adults must lead. Moreover, as Dr. Poussaint recommends, we need to develop institutions to sustain our children's development, building upon the extended family and concepts of interdependence.[22] Right now, value formation is being left to other institutions. It is time for African Americans to recapture this for their children.

The propulsion for demographics is upon us. By 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that minorities will constitute over one-third of the nation's population, a steady increase from the estimated 22 percent now. The changes in the economic, social, and political landscape occasioned by such population shifts can only be imagined. We can deduce though that minorities of color will be a dominant force in the labor market, as evidenced by their relatively larger birth rates compared to whites, and their younger age cohorts overall.

Whether African Americans will be able to exploit this increasing demographic advantage is a challenge confronting this community. Certainly, this advantage challenges them to exert greater control and direction over the development of their children.

FOOTNOTES

[1] *Death Before Dying: The Tragedy of Infant Mortality*, The Report of the National Commission to Prevent Infant Mortality (Washington, August 1988).

[2] "Adolescent Male Responsibility in African-American Families," a paper presented by Robert B. Hill at the 1988 National Urban League conference on "Manhood and Fatherhood," in Detroit, MI.

[3] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

[4] *Teenage Pregnancy: An Advocate's Guide to Numbers* (Washington: January-March, 1988).

[5] Claudia Glenn Dowling, *Teenaged Mothers Seventeen Years Later* (New York: Commonwealth Fund Papers, 1987). Reports on the work of Frank Furstenberg, J. Brooks-Gunn, and S. Phillip Morgan, who followed the lives of 300 young mothers over 17 years.

[6] Dowling, *ibid.* Also: Jane C. Quint and James Riccio, *The Challenge of Serving Pregnant and Parenting Teens, Lessons from Project Redirection* (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1985)—an evaluation of teen parents in a highly publicized national program funded by the Ford Foundation. A majority of the participants were school dropouts prior to pregnancy and 70 percent were receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children. See also: "Single Mothers—The Story Behind the Sterotypes," *RAND Research Review*, Vol. XII, No. 1, which reports on a detailed RAND study (*Beyond Stereotype: Who Becomes a Single Teenage Mother*) by Abrahamse, Morrison, and Waite who tracked 13,000 high school females for two years, cutting across race and family income. Also, Joy Dryfoos, *Putting the Boy in the Picture*.

[7] Elizabeth Marek, "The Lives of Teenage Mothers, Schoolbooks, Boyfriends, and Babies," *Harpers Magazine*, April 1989.

[8] *RAND Research Review*, Vol. XII, No. 1.

[9] Dowling, *Teenaged Mothers Seventeen Years Later*, *op. cit.*

[10] *The Common Good* (New York: Ford Foundation, 1989).

[11] Dowling, *op. cit.*, and Dryfoos, *Putting the Boy in the Picture*.

[12] Jacqueline Smollar and Theodore Ooms, *Young Unwed Fathers: Research Review, Policy Dilemmas, and Options, A Summary Report*.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] According to a January 1989 Children's Defense Fund report, 2.7 million youths between ages 16 and 24 were unable to find work. Between 1973 and 1986, the earning power of males, 20 to 24, fell by 25 percent (adjusted for inflation).

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